

Washington, D.C. - Assistant Senate Majority Leader Dick Durbin (D-IL) and Congresswoman Melissa Bean (D-IL) announced that the language necessary to complete the merger of the North Chicago Veterans Affairs Medical Center and Naval Health Clinic Great Lakes was signed into law today by President Obama.

“Soon, quality medical care will be available under one roof for veterans, servicemembers and their families in and around North Chicago,” said Durbin. “Joining a VA Medical Center with a Naval Health Clinic was a revolutionary idea ten years ago. Today, that idea becomes a reality in North Chicago and can serve as a model for similar cost-savings and quality care across the nation.”

“With the President’s signature, the Lovell Federal Health Care Center can now be completed,” Bean said. “Combining the VA Medical Center with the Naval Health Clinic will provide quality care to active duty personnel, veterans, and military retirees while saving the taxpayers \$80 million in construction costs, using our resources efficiently and effectively.”

Durbin first introduced Lovell Federal Health Center legislation in November 2008 and Congresswoman Melissa Bean (D-IL) introduced similar legislation – co-sponsored by Congressman Mark Kirk (R-IL) – in the House of Representatives earlier this year. The approval of today’s language, as part of the Defense Authorization Act, represents a collective effort by Congress, the VA, Navy, and labor to address the complex issue of combining two federal hospitals. When complete, the Lovell Federal Health Center will be the first health care facility in the nation to be operated jointly between the VA and the Navy, saving taxpayers millions of dollars that would otherwise have been needed to rebuild or renovate the Navy’s nearby hospital.

After the VA announced plans in 1999 to close the North Chicago VA Medical Center, Durbin brought Illinois House and Senate members together to request an investigation into the possibility of having the Navy and the VA enter into a joint agreement for use of the facility. Senator Durbin later passed language requiring the Navy to expand the use of the hospital and to work with the VA to finalize site selection for the joint ambulatory care center and construction design. Today's legislation is the final legislative piece that will allow beneficiaries who had previously received care at the Naval Health Clinic Great Lakes to be eligible for care and not required to make a co-pay.

Earlier this year, Durbin and Bean joined the Secretary of the VA, Eric Shinseki, at the North Chicago Federal Health Center for a round table discussion on the need for legislative language to clear the remaining hurdles in merging the Navy and VA hospitals at North Chicago. Secretary Shinseki's visit followed a January meeting with Durbin, who stressed the importance of the efforts in North Chicago on the eve of Shinseki's confirmation.

For the last year, Durbin and Bean have worked tirelessly with stakeholders to fine-tune language that will allow the North Chicago facility to operate as has been envisioned for years--as an integrated facility of the armed services and the VA. Additionally, Durbin worked with the Chairman of the Veterans Affairs Committee Daniel Akaka (D-HI) to encourage the VA to address this issue in the agency's 2010 budget. In May, it was announced that the VA did exactly that, making it easier for Congress to work with the Administration to complete the North Chicago project.